Published and Copyright (c) 1999 - 2002
All Rights Reserved

Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

With Contributions by:

Kevin Savetz

To subscribe to A-ONE, change e-mail addresses, or unsubscribe, log on to our website at: www.atarinews.org and click on "Subscriptions".
OR subscribe to A-ONE by sending a message to: dpj@atarinews.org and your address will be added to the distribution list.
To unsubscribe from A-ONE, send the following: Unsubscribe A-ONE
Please make sure that you include the same address that you used to subscribe from.

To download A-ONE, set your browser bookmarks to one of the following sites:

http://people.delphiforums.com/dpj/a-one.htm
http://www.icwhen.com/aone/
http://a1mag.atari.org
Now available:
http://www.atarinews.org

Visit the Atari Advantage Forum on Delphi!
http://forums.delphiforums.com/m/main.asp?sigdir=atari

=~=~=~=

~ HP Merger Plans Boost! ~ People Are Talking! ~ VM Labs Is Sold!

~ STeem 2.2 Is Released! ~ Mac OS X Updated! ~ Xbox Scratches Discs
~ More GeoCities Fees! ~ Windows Someday Free? ~ ACE MIDI Is Here!
~ Flash MX Coming Soon! ~ Simputer Set For May! ~ More APX Software!

-* Microsoft Seeks Another Delay *-
-* Groups Vilify Microsoft Settlement! *-
-* Copyright Certificates Due In Napster Case *-

=~=~=~=

->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""

Well, another remnant of what is now Atari history is no longer - VM Labs, started by former Atari VP Richard Miller, has been sold in a bankruptcy auction. Quite a few former Atari people were at VM Labs: Miller, Bill Rehbock, Don Thomas, and others. I think I knew most of the "notables", having met them in person at one Atari show or another, or by phone and e-mail. It's too bad about the company, but in today's tech world, it's not uncommon.

Not much else happening. The Microsoft case continues to drag; it's almost anticlimactic these days. And now Sun Microsystems has files their own antitrust case against Microsoft. It's almost getting to be boring. You watch, Microsoft will get off with a hefty slap on the wrist and continue to do what they do now.

It's getting closer and closer to spring, thankfully. A definitely odd winter this year, however. For you folks in southern New England, you can start to send thank you cards to me at any time! You just know that since I bought a new snow thrower, I wasn't going to get much chance to "enjoy" it this year! <grin> You're welcome!

Until next time...

=~=~=~=

ACE MIDI V1.0 Available

At last, after 2.5 years of development, ACE MIDI is here. For the first time the ATARI community can use the Falcon030 as a full blown MIDI synthesiser. ACE MIDI fits perfectly into any studio as it has a wide range of possibilities. Use the wave oscillators to create warm, cold, smooth, funny, weird, strange sounds, or load some samples to create that perfect beat. Everything is easily controlled by a number of devices. Use the LFO for vibrato, tremolo and wah-wah effects, the STEP MODULATOR on vocals to achieve "Cher singing" effects. All this in 16 bit resolution. Tap your sounds individually through 4 outputs to your favourite effect box and add reverb, distortion or what ever you feel

like, or use the internal effects to give your sounds that extra touch. The sounds in ACE MIDI ranges from retro chip-blip-blop sounds to multi-sampled pianos, strings or what ever you want to do. All this nicely packaged in a easy to use interface.

Read more about ACE MIDI and download the demo version now!

http://newbeat.atari.org

More APX Software Available for Download

I've just updated the Atari Program Exchange (APX) section of atariarchives.org. The following APX programs are now available for download, with the permission of the authors:

Starware
Mapware
Astrology
Mankala
Speed-O-Disk
BASIC/XA
Smasher
T: A Text Display Device
Yahtman
Ultimate Renumber Utility
Bellum
Home Inventory
Keypad Controller
DiskMenu
DrawIt
Catterpiggle
Bootleg
Moon Marauder
Ringmaster
Supersort

Check it out at http://www.atariarchives.org/APX/

Steem v2.2 Released

Steem v2.2 has arrived, the day after releasing v2.1 we managed to fix a big bug so that is why this version has come so soon, here is what has changed:

-- Bug Fixes --

. VBL timing inaccuracies (Lethal Xcess, No Cooper demo).
. STE sound short buffer support (Another World).
. Overscan timer B bug (Mindbomb).
. v2.1 24-bit straight blit/screen flip lowres double size
  window/fullscreen yellowing fixed.
. v2.1 FDC seek failed flag bug fixed.
. Hard drive Pexec close file bug (XSteem segfaults).
. Many other hard drive emulation bugs.

. Proper floppy disk light emulation.
. XSteem - options and general info should now work on all window managers.

-- New Features --

. Configurable run speed %.
. Better support for non-English keyboards, alternate switching and Type ST Character shortcut.
. 256 colour brightness/contrast display
. XSteem - statically linked binary, should work on any 486-compatible Linux system.
. Debug build - shortcuts for trace, run to rte and logging suspension.

Download the new version from http://www.blimey.strayduck.com/

Genesis Micro Shares Up On VM Labs Acquisition

Shares in display technology company Genesis Microchip Inc. rose on Tuesday after the company won a bankruptcy auction for the assets of graphics company VM Labs, which analysts said would give Genesis new leverage in the digital video market.

Shares in Genesis were up 11.7 percent at $28.25 in late morning trade on the Nasdaq. Last Thursday, the shares plummeted 37 percent after the company issued guidance that showed no boost to earnings from its purchase of Sage Inc.

On Tuesday, Genesis said it had won an auction for the assets of privately held VM Labs, including its patents and intellectual property, for $13.6 million in cash. The purchase is expected to close within the next 30 days.

VM’s ‘‘NUON" processor is used in DVD players to provide interactive features, like movable camera angles and picture zoom. The NUON chip was also intended to power video games on standard DVD players, though that market found little success.

‘‘Some of the features, such as zoom and interactivity within DVD, are intriguing and could potentially be leveraged by Genesis’ video processing and scaling technology," Pacific Growth Equities analyst Brian Alger said in a client note on Tuesday.

Brokerage G Cowmen agreed, noting on Tuesday that Genesis, with its own technology, assets acquired from Sage and VM Labs’ video decoding properties, now has all of the parts necessary for digital television products.

=~=~=~=

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Before we get into the UseNet stuff, I want to mention a friend of mine. He’s not an Atari user.. he’s not even a computer hobbyist. But we’ve been friends since the fourth or fifth grade. We’ve stayed friends for the past thirty-plus years and even though he now lives hundreds of miles away we keep in touch.

His grandmother passed away this past Monday. She began her life in Villa Russia and came to the United States when she was only 16. In the past few years, she had failed somewhat and had her son living with her. He took care of her until it became to much for him. After all, he’s 87 years old!

Yes, that’s right. He’s 87 years old. His mother (my buddy’s grandmother) was 105! She left Russia before the revolution and spent the next 89 years here in the U.S. She was always mindful of where she had come from without the "when I was a kid we had to..." mindset.

The only humorous story I have about her is that a couple of years ago I heard her complain that she couldn’t find good black bread here in this country. Never being one to shy away from a challenge... and liking to bake anyway... I searched high and low for a recipe for russian black bread. I found one and gave it a shot for a get-together they were having.

The bread was terrible! It was course and incredibly dense. Now I’ve never been one to enjoy "Wondergum" or the other ultra-soft white breads, but this was like a brick! But having mentioned the bread to my friend (and knowing that he had mentioned it to his grandmother) I had no choice but to bring it with me. I made apologies as they unwrapped and cut it. The grandmother slathered a slice with some sort of fruit preserve and took a bite. To my relief and surprise, she smiled and finished the slice of bread in a few bites. Then she stood, re-wrapped the bread, put it on the counter and said to her family, "This is mine. You touch, I hit you with stick." I still am not crazy about that thick, course bread, but every time I smell or taste it, I think of her.

When all is said and done, what amazes me is that she had seen THREE CENTURIES. In her time she saw us progress from horse-and-buggy to the internet. Two world wars, the Titanic, moon landings, and all the rest unfolded before her. Thankfully, she passed suddenly and quickly. The only down-side is that her older sister could not be present for the funeral... she just couldn’t make the trip from her home in Belarus in time.

Well, let’s get on with the news, hints, tips, and info from the UseNet:

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

Wayne Martz asks about what CAB overlay to use:

"What is the best ovl to use with cab? I’m on a CT2B Falcon, MagiC."

Lonny Pursell tells Wayne:

"If you need SSL the mint ovl is the only one that can do that. Otherwise Dan’s OVL works pretty darn good."

Robert Schaffner adds:

"booklage cab.ovl
http://obooklage.free.fr/Atari/index.htm "

Bernd Maedicke jumps in and says:

"Oh no, I think the OVL from Dan Ackermann is better. It supports the CABCHECK.MDL and by the Booklage.OVL isn’t support anymore."

Derryck Croker adds his thoughts:

"One of the third-party overlays won’t let you use the auto-download module. I think it’s Dan’s."

Martin Byttebier adds:

"One thing to bear in mind is that only the MiNT-net ovl and Dan’s ovl are still maintained. The rest included the original Iconnect ovl are dead. The Booklage ovl can’t even handle Cookies.

In my humble opinion, the MiNT-net ovl is the best."

James Haslam asks about his Falcon’s blitter chip:

"Can anyone tell me how to turn on the Blitter on my Falcon?

Profile2 tells me that I have one but that it is turned off. Someone at the Cheshunt Computer Club thinks that MagiC turns it off for some reason.

I seem to remember from my days of having an ST that the General.CPX had an option for it, but the space for it when run on a Falcon has the CPU Cache button instead.

If I can turn it on, would there possibly be a problem with MagiC having it on?"

’Steve’ tells James:

"I know that when I’ve got NVDI installed (err like all the time!) then this will automatically turn off the blitter.. maybe it’s faster without it?? Dunno about MagiC tho...

Even so, there’ll be no problem turning it back on whatever the OS you’re using. I use Gem with NVDI and mine is always off at startup! I simply use a cpx CP to turn the blitter back on. Check out any decent web or ftp sites, but i’ll email you mine if you like."

Martin Tarenskeen adds:

"I have a general.cpx that has buttons for both Cache and Blitter. I also have a little program called fcontrol (.acc or .app). I like this one because it’s so simple. It has buttons to switch on/off Falcon’s keyclick, loudspeaker, blitter, and cache, and that’s about it."

Hallvard Tangeraas asks about printing and TOS 2.06:

"I'd like to know more about issues relating to using a printer with TOS 2.06....

1) I suppose that whatever is set up within "PRINTER.CPX" relates to *any* printing within TOS 2.06. This includes the following (from the desktop):
 -Pressing <Alternate><Help> (print a graphic image of the desktop)
 -Pressing the ">" key (print the active window's contents)
Is my assumption correct?

2) The "PRINTER.CPX" module only contains settings for dot-matrix and daisy-wheel printers. Obviously a bit dated for printers used today (inkjet and laser printers). Are there replacement CPX modules for other printers, or does this CPX module still work for inj/laser printers?

3) I've been told that pressing <Alternate><Help> creates a graphic printout of the whole screen (i.e. including icons etc.),
but what about ">" which (according to the TOS 2.06 help window) prints the contents of the top window?
Does this print a text-listing of the files, or a graphic image of that window?

Anything else I should document which I've missed here, in the TOS 2.06 user-guide I'm writing?"

Stephen Moss tells Hallvard:

"As far as I know this is correct, any program that uses specific printer drivers should set up the printer port to the required settings overriding those specified by the accessory as necessary.

This might depend on the printer, but it works on my Canon Bj10e Bubblejet printer even when the dip switch set set to BJ10 mode as opposed to Epsom emulation so it will probably work on other printers. If it works on a TOS 1.02 ST it should work under TOS 2.06 as most "improvements" to TOS were either functional or hardware specific while retaining most of the underlying core functions, commands and keyboard shortcuts from earlier versions.

You have to set it to Dot Matrix though, I don't think anything other than a Daisy Wheel print will respond to the Daisy-Wheel setting."

Charles Stanley takes the opportunity to ask:

"I've had a MegaOne, a STE and now a TT. I have never found that ALT-HELP printed anything at all. Can anyone comment positively on this?"

Greg Goodwin tells Charles:

"This works quite nicely if your printer understands the Epson FX protocols. Most 9 pin dot matrix printers in the 1980s did.

Nowadays, there are AUTO programs that you could load to duplicate this, but why bother?"

Peter West adds:

"As far as I know, this desktop function was intended for Epson

FX-style 9-pin printers only. There are two things to be considered: The commands sent to the printer to put it into a graphic print mode and control this for horizontal and vertical feed, and also the dot resolution. The Epson FXs had 180x180 dpi, some 24-pins 360x360 maximum, while most inkjets and lasers have 300x300 upwards.

So even if the Atari routines worked with 24-pin and inkjets etc in Epson emulation mode (i.e. supporting the ESC/P command language), the resolution would be wrong. But most modern inkjets and lasers support a variant of HP's command set, (Canon has its own) which are completely different. That is why Imagecopy and JM-Snap etc were invented."

Well folks, that's it for this week. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

=~=~=~=

->In This Week's Gaming Section - Jeremy McGrath Supercross World!
Ecco the Dolphin! Way of Samurai!
Playstation2 Online Service!
And much more!

=~=~=~=

->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Acclaim Max Sports Ships 'Jeremy McGrath Supercross World' For Nintendo GameCube

Delivering high-flying motorcycle action for the Nintendo GameCube, Acclaim Max Sports announced that it has shipped Jeremy McGrath Supercross World.

''Jeremy McGrath Supercross World delivers a perfect mix of simulation and arcade racing that will be a must-have title for Nintendo GameCube owners that crave heart-pounding, two-wheel action," said Evan Stein, Vice President of Brand for Acclaim.

Created by Acclaim Studios Salt Lake, Jeremy McGrath Supercross World exclusively features 10-time Supercross champion, Jeremy McGrath. In addition, the game offers many exciting features, including:

* 25 super-sized tracks - baja, indoor supercross, freestyle and outdoor motocross;

* Play as any of the game’s 7 pro riders in either a quick freestyle tournament or through the championship mode;
* Customizable rider attributes, including jumping, cornering, stability and stunts;
* Integrated career rewards unlock new environments, bikes and riders;
* Innovative ‘‘Stunt Advantage System" provides players with enhanced rider performance after they execute stunts correctly;
* Flexible stunt system allows for holding, landing and stringing stunts together in succession for extra points;
* Over 24 different stunts, including nac-nacs, supermans, fender grabs, 360s and barrel rolls. Plus, each rider has his own unique stunt package;
* Head-to-head split-screen gameplay in all four racing modes;
* Various mini-challenges, including ‘‘Get the Hole-Shot," ‘‘Grab the Cash," ‘‘Jump Through the Field Goal" and more.

Jeremy McGrath Supercross World is currently available for the Nintendo GameCube at a suggested retail price of $49.99. The game is also available for the PlayStation2 computer entertainment system.

Acclaim Entertainment, Inc. Ships ‘Ecco the Dolphin: Defender of the Future’

Broadening its rich portfolio of next-generation products, Acclaim Entertainment, Inc. announced that it has shipped Ecco the Dolphin: Defender of the Future for the PlayStation2 computer entertainment system in North America.

‘‘We’re thrilled to expand upon our diverse array of product offerings for the growing PlayStation2 audience, with this title that is truly unique," said Sarah Anderson, Senior Vice President of Brand. ‘‘Building upon its strong heritage as a million-plus selling brand, Ecco the Dolphin: Defender of the Future delivers stunning graphics, immersive game play and an exclusive new control functionality, which will enhance replay value and will appeal to a wide audience."

When an evil force threatens to destroy the Earth, it’s up to Ecco the Dolphin to save the future. Everyone’s favorite mammal makes his PlayStation2 debut in Ecco the Dolphin: Defender of the Future, an all-new aquatic adventure of epic proportions. In order to save the planet and win back his future, Ecco must travel through mysterious and breathtaking underwater worlds filled with puzzles, friends, foes and danger while in search of the stolen dolphin-power that he must recover from the far reaches of time and space. The future of the Earth now rests on the fins of this friendly dolphin in the underwater gaming experience of a lifetime. The Sega Dreamcast version of Ecco the Dolphin: Defender of the Future was acclaimed by the press as:

* ‘‘One of the most beautiful games ever. Playing Ecco is like transforming your television screen into a porthole on the side of the Nautilus." - gamespot.com
* ‘‘...some of the most stunning environments yet seen in a videogame...Ecco the Dolphin: Defender of the Future is a game that simply must be experienced by PS2 owners." - IGN.com
* ‘‘Ecco delivers the goods with a huge splash." - Gamepro

Ecco the Dolphin: Defender of the Future offers many exciting features,

including:

* Sega’s wildly successful brand makes its PlayStation2 debut, delivering fully optimized graphics and gameplay;
* 34 meticulously detailed underwater worlds, each with unique themes and puzzles;
* Stunning environments, adapted from real underwater films and photographic resources;
* Realistic underwater sea life, including friendly turtles and whales, as well as menacing sharks and stinging jellyfish;
* Enhanced control scheme and in-game radar feature, offering a smooth gaming experience;
* Compelling science fiction storyline written by award-winning author, David Brin;
* Masterful soundtrack of ambient, mystical music created by British composer Tim Follin;
* Cutting-edge enemy artificial intelligence keeps gameplay fresh and exciting;
* Awarded ‘‘Best Adventure Game" (Sega Dreamcast) of E3 2000.

Ecco the Dolphin: Defender of the Future is currently available for the PlayStation2 computer entertainment system at a suggested retail price of $49.99.

BAM! Entertainment To Bring Action Adventure Game Way of the Samurai To the PlayStation 2

BAM! Entertainment announced that it will publish Way of the Samurai for the Sony PlayStation 2. Way of the Samurai, a 3D action-adventure game, is a weapons-based combat game with an interesting story element that follows a sizeable cast of characters. Way of the Samurai is being developed by Japan-based Acquire, the developer of the first two titles in the acclaimed Tenchu series, and will ship later this spring.

‘‘We were extremely pleased to get the opportunity to work with Acquire to publish Way of the Samurai," said Bernard Stolar, President and Chief Operating Officer of BAM! Entertainment. ‘‘Considering Way of the Samurai’s amazing style, dynamic story and incredible depth of gameplay, it is entirely possible we could have a sleeper hit on our hands this summer."

Way of the Samurai places the player in the midst of a feudal Japan as warring factions vie for control of a country. The year is 1878. The collapse of the Tokugawa Shogunate and the rise of the Meiji Restoration Era have brought an end to the age of samurai. Born to a time that no longer needs or welcomes them, these samurai are a far cry from the heroes and legends that preceded them. This is a story of the Way of the Samurai in their final days. These are turbulent times. At Rokkotsu Pass, three groups wrestle for power and into this conflict comes our hero, who quickly is swept up into their battles.

In this period-based action-adventure, the story is determined by the player’s actions, each decision and action affecting the outcome of the game. Deception and betrayal are tools to be used at will, with sudden, swift combat the final deciding factor. As the samurai, the player will be able to fight enemies in a dynamic 3D environment. Each character in the game has a different fighting style dependant on their sword type and with

more than forty types of swords and 200 different fighting techniques, incredibly realistic one-on-one duels make Way of the Samurai the ultimate samurai adventure game.

Sony to Launch PlayStation 2 Online Game Service

Sony Corp. on Thursday took its next strategic step in the U.S. video game market, saying it will launch online services for its market-leading PlayStation 2 game console in August.

Sony said it will sell a network adapter for $39.99 beginning that month, allowing for both low- and high-speed Internet connections, though on a conference call to discuss the announcement the company could not say how many adapters would be available at launch.

To support that launch and encourage development for the new capabilities, Sony also said it will offer financial support to third-party publishers for both the marketing and development of online-enabled titles, though the company declined to say how large the fund would be.

Analysts had expected Sony to launch the online service, a long-time goal for the company since the $299 PS2 was unveiled in November 2000. Sony said it will begin testing the system with a group of about 1,000 players this month.

The PS2 has an installed base in the United States of over 8 million units and it dominated sales charts during the last holiday season, in the face of competition from other advanced console products. Analyst have said the game industry is at the early end of an unprecedented five-year growth cycle.

But at least one analyst was skeptical about the new online offering’s prospects.

"Peripherals and add-ons do not do well in this industry," said Mike Wallace, an analyst at UBS Warburg.

"No one’s going to spend a lot of money (on this); first of all because it’s not apparent how any of the third parties are going to make any money on this, and second of all, there’s no installed base," he said.

Wallace was referring to major third-party game publishers, like Electronic Arts Inc. and Activision Inc.

As opposed to other online gaming offerings, the Sony system will not be pay-for-play; users will pay only the initial cost of the game, plus standard Internet access charges.

One analyst thought the relatively low price of the adapter would alone be enough to make it successful.

"I would expect a high attach rate ... at that type of price point, it’s obviously priced to move," said Jeetil Patel, an analyst at Deutsche Banc Alex. Brown.

Sony spokeswoman Molly Smith said the slate of launch titles for the network adapter has not yet been fully developed, but that at least one

title would be the company’s own -- "SOCOM," a game centered around Navy Seals.

She also said participants in the test program would test games including "Frequency" and "Twisted Metal Online" over the next few weeks, though they have not definitively been chosen as launch titles yet.

Kaz Hirai, Sony Computer Entertainment of America’s president and chief operating officer, told Reuters Television the company would announce more lineup details at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in May.

"We look to have a dozen titles or so at least for launch," Hirai said.

The adapter will have ports for both a dial-up modem and a broadband connection. It will attach to the back of the console over its main expansion bay via two included screws.

Microsoft Corp. launched its Xbox console in November with a built-in Ethernet port and the software giant has said it would begin to roll out online services this year.

The adapter bundle will come with a start-up disk pre-configured for a number of major ISPs, including EarthLink Inc. and SBC Communications Inc. , though Sony said any ISP can be used with the service.

Sony said its entire group of ISP partners reaches a total of 11 million users nationwide.

The only console online gaming service currently offered in the United States is one for Sega Corp.’s now-discontinued Dreamcast console. The Dreamcast had a dial-up modem built in, but a broadband adapter was unsuccessful.

With Sony’s announcement, the only major console in the U.S. market without any online options is Nintendo Co. Ltd.’s GameCube. The $199 GameCube, released in November, has no built-in access ports, and Nintendo has said little about its online plans.

While Thursday’s announcement centered around online gaming, Sony hinted at the network adapter’s potential in a statement.

"Use of the (adapter) allows consumers simultaneous access and connection to multiple devices in the home through (PS2)," it said."

Smith said that while nothing is definite yet, the adapter will eventually allow people to, for example, stream MP3 music files from their computer through the PS2 while simultaneously connected to an online game.

She described the roll-out of such services as a two-step process.

"Phase Two is kind of going to be a realization of what our overall vision is," she said. "It’s more of an e-distribution kind of system."

While the second phase is not expected this year, Smith said more details about its launch plans and components would be announced over the next few months.

Separately on Thursday, Sony made a $199 Linux add-on kit for PS2 available for pre-order. The kit will let people use the PS2 as a computer running the Linux open-source operating system.

The kit ships with a keyboard and hard drive, although the hard drive will not work with PS2 games. Smith said a 40- gigabyte gaming hard drive would likely be part of Phase Two.

On its conference call, the company also briefly addressed pricing, with Hirai saying "What I can say right now is we're very confident of the pricing we have on the (PS2) console and have no plans to reduce the pricing at this time."

Sony Computer Entertainment America Extends Value Proposition On Playstation2 With The Introduction of 'Greatest Hits' Series

At its second annual retail and publishers conference, ''Destination PlayStation," Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. announced the launch of a ''Greatest Hits" series on PlayStation 2, a line-up of game titles proven to be all-time favorites on the platform. Following the lead of its market driving ''Greatest Hits" collection on the original PlayStation, the company expects this new initiative to significantly contribute to category growth and overall software sales when it is introduced April 1 through retail outlets nationwide.

After an extraordinary holiday selling season in 2001, in which more than 3 million PlayStation 2 units were sold in a 60-day period, consumers demonstrated their overwhelming support and loyalty to the PlayStation brand. With the introduction of this new ''Greatest Hits" series, the power of the PlayStation 2 experience becomes attractive to an even broader audience as top-of-the-line games become impulse purchases at an expected manufacturers suggested retail price of $24.99.

To be included in the PlayStation 2 ''Greatest Hits" series, a title must meet two key criteria: sales must be in excess of 400,000 units and the title must have been on the market for more than nine months. Initial offerings from Sony Computer Entertainment America will include such titles as ATV Offroad Fury, Gran Turismo 3 A-spec, Twisted Metal: Black, Dark Cloud. These four titles have become bona fide hits on PlayStation 2 with combined unit sales of more than 2.8 million.

''With an installed hardware base of 8.6 million units, and a cumulative software-to-hardware tie ratio of 4.5 to 1, we have outperformed original category and general business expectations with PlayStation 2 during its first year on the market," said Andrew House, senior vice president, Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. ''We are proud of the fact that with our publishing partners, we collectively have been able to deliver the most impressive, compelling gaming experience to millions of enthusiasts around the world. The new "Greatest Hits'' collection provides an incentive for new gamers to purchase PlayStation 2 and core gamers to add classic titles to their existing libraries.

''Historically, we have always taken a very consumer-centric approach to the market," added House. ''We are focused on presenting users with the best entertainment experience at compelling prices, further extending the PlayStation 2 value proposition by consistently passing on savings to the consumer. With such strong software support for PlayStation 2 we now are able to offer must-have games for around $25."

In addition to the four inaugural titles from Sony Computer Entertainment

America, the company and its numerous publishing partners are planning additional ‘‘Greatest Hits" releases throughout the course of the year. Each title selected for ‘‘Greatest Hits" status must reach the pre-defined criteria and will be included at the discretion of the individual publisher. Pricing may vary per manufacturer.

WWF Sim Shows "Raw" Power of Xbox

On a Monday night in the old Providence Convention Center, Kurt Angle, World Wrestling Federation superstar and Olympic gold medalist, is pummeling a guy named Jericho for the WWF championship.

Suddenly, Angle backs into a 7-foot-tall masked warrior named Kane who has appeared out of nowhere. A look of stunned surprise crosses Angle’s face. The crowd witnessing the February 25 live event roars with delight. Kane bashes Angle and lets Jericho pin him. Rock music blares. Fans scream.

Trying to emulate this type of comedy, campy pathos and showmanship are two new computer games -- ‘‘WWF Smackdown! Just Bring It’’ for the PlayStation 2 ($50) and, most recently, ‘‘WWF Raw’’ for Xbox ($50). I can tell you from a first-hand comparison with the real thing in Providence that neither game even comes close.

For the record, ‘‘Raw’’ is, by far, the better looking of the two console games -- which gives Xbox owners bragging rights. Its graphics are a big improvement over ‘‘Smackdown,’’ the previous champion of wrestling sims.

Yet in some ways, ‘‘Smackdown’’ remains a better game because the Xbox version lacks some of ‘‘Smackdown’s’’ features and versatility. Why THQ, the developer, didn’t simply take ‘‘Smackdown’’ and improve on it is a mystery.

I tested both games by, among other things, trying to replicate the Angle-Jericho match. On the Xbox, I was stymied because ‘‘Raw’s’’ initial 43 characters didn’t include WWF diva Stephanie McMahon, who was managing for Jericho.

‘‘Smackdown’’ has even fewer wrestlers to start -- 36 -- and, again, no Steph.

I thought I might have better luck with the main event, a battle between Stone Cold Steve Austin and the ever-not-so-humble Mr. Perfect. In both the PS-2 and Xbox games, Mr. Perfect was nowhere to be found.

The visual superiority of ‘‘Raw’’ is obvious right away. In ‘‘Smackdown,’’ audience members look like jumping cardboard cutouts. In ‘‘Raw,’’ they’re three dimensional figures and the wrestlers themselves have smoother outlines.

When you hit the ring ropes in ‘‘Raw,’’ they vibrate. Except for some specific moves in ‘‘Smackdown,’’ the ropes show little flexibility -- an issue that’s more important than you might think. In ‘‘Smackdown,’’ wrestlers’ bodies are always passing through the rope strands, detracting from the realism. The vibrating robes in ‘‘Raw’’ help hide that flaw.

An unfortunate feature of both products is the ineptitude of the game when it controls the wrestlers. ‘‘Raw’’ and ‘‘Smackdown’’ make wrestlers

repeatedly grab at thin air or dive onto an opponent when there’s nobody on the canvas to hurt.

Neither game knows how to make the wrestlers walk realistically and if you look closely when a smaller wrestler is put in a Boston Crab hold in ‘‘Raw,’’ the body of the wrestler on the mat is suspended several inches off the ground.

‘‘Smackdown’s’’ strength is that it offers many more types of matches than ‘‘Raw’’ and a better system for selecting them. ‘‘Smackdown’’ also seems to encourage more wrestling moves, which I prefer, while ‘‘Raw’’ wants to make the computer-controlled opponents do little more than punch, slap and stomp.

‘‘Smackdown’s’’ system for creating a custom wrestler is far more versatile, but in some ways it’s too complex. For each new wrestler, selecting a hairstyle is unbelievably complicated. ‘‘Raw’’ has streamlined the system considerably, to the benefit of players. It also has a nice tutorial mode.

Pro wrestling simulations have evolved nicely over the years, but they’re still a long way from matching fighting games like ‘‘DOA3,’’ where hair and costumes flow, and body outlines are smooth.

And if the day ever comes when programmers can add dramatic and comedic timing to these games, Austin, Kane, Angle and the rest of the WWF crew could be out of a job.

"WWF Smackdown! Just Bring It" and "WWF Raw" are rated for teens.

Hitting The Shelves

For fans of real-life boxing, Electronic Arts has just released "Knockout Kings 2002" for the Xbox and PlayStation 2 ($50 each). It features Muhammad Ali, Roberto Duran, Joe Frazier, Sugar Ray Leonard, and Lennox Lewis; and the folks at EA claim that the game mimics their boxing styles. Facial expressions change as the fighters get hit, and you can create your own player from scratch. It’s rated for teens.

Finally, Crave Entertainment’s new version of Ultimate Fighting Championship, ‘‘UFC: Tapout’’ ($50), is out for the Xbox. The brutal nine-year-old form of no-holds-barred fighting has been banned in most states, but is making a bit of a comeback. The first UFC title, for Dreamcast, was a big hit for Crave. It’s also rated for teens.

Microsoft: Xbox Could Scratch Discs

Microsoft Corp. said Thursday its new Xbox video game machine can scratch game discs used in it although the damage doesn’t hurt the game performance or video quality.

The Xbox, priced at 34,800 yen ($260), debuted in Japan on Feb. 21, challenging video-game kings Sony Corp. and Nintendo Co.

Within days, however, Japanese game fans began complaining about scratched discs after playing new games they bought to use with the new machine.

By Thursday, Microsoft Japan had received nearly 590 complaints about the problem, said company spokeswoman Midori Takahashi.

She said the problem has not been reported in the United States, where more than 1.5 million Xbox machines have been sold since they arrived in stores in November. A Microsoft representative in the United States said that any U.S. customers who report similar problems could call the company's help line to ask for repairs or exchanges.

Takahashi said the tiny scratches are mostly made on the outer rim of the discs' bottom, where the game data is written.

The company initially believed the problem was a natural result of friction between the machine's disc tray and the software inside. But company technicians discovered that technical problems might have caused the scratches.

"Japanese users are very sensitive to any scratches, and many urged us to look into the case. So we decided to examine their machines and provide free repairs if necessary," Takahashi said.

The company said it will exchange damaged discs as well.

Microsoft has not determined what causes the scratches, Takahashi said.

Microsoft is going ahead with Xbox's planned March 14 debut in Europe, she said. The company advised its factory in Hungary to conduct more thorough quality checks before releasing the product, she added.

Takahashi declined to say how many Xbox machines have been sold in Japan. Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, who was in Japan earlier for the Xbox debut, said his company had prepared 250,000 machines in the first shipment to Japan and is ready to send more.

Judge Dismisses Columbine Suit Against Media

A federal judge on Monday dismissed a lawsuit that claimed Time Warner Inc. and other entertainment companies produced works that drove two teenagers to gun down and kill a teacher and 12 fellow students in the 1999 Columbine High School massacre. The family of Dave Sanders, a teacher who was fatally shot during the massacre in Littleton, Colorado, brought the suit against Time Warner, now known as AOL Time Warner, and the company's New Line Cinema as makers and distributors of "The Basketball Diaries."

After the shooting, it was discovered that gunmen Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, -- who were also killed during the massacre-- were avid fans of violent video games and the movie "The Basketball Diaries."

In the movie, the protagonist guns down his teacher and some classmates in cold blood.

The family also sued producers of video games such as Acclaim Entertainment, Atari Corp. and Nintendo's Nintendo of America unit, saying the two young men were unduly influenced by the games.

But U.S. District Judge Lewis Babcock said courts around the United States have rejected similar claims brought against media or entertainment

defendants.

The judge said the two gunmen were the ones responsible for the teacher’s death.

=~=~=~=

A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Flash MX Coming Soon

In about 10 days, Macromedia will be releasing the latest version of its Flash authoring software. The new version will add some functionality currently provided by media players such as QuickTime Player, Real Player and Windows Media Player.

Flash is the Web’s most widely distributed interactive media player and the standard format for high impact, vector-based Web sites. Flash MX is a tool for creating a broad range of "high-impact content and rich Internet applications that go beyond the boundaries of the browser," according to Macromedia.

The first in a planned MX line of products, Flash MX will provide a broad range of multimedia designs and rich Internet application development features in one product, Jeremy Clark, Flash product manager told MacCentral. It will provide designers with the ability to create graphics, sophisticated user interfaces and synchronized animation with audio and new video playbac! k to provide supreme, branded experiences, he added.

"Since the economy took a bit of a downturn, several Macromedia customers have been affected," Clark said. "People with Flash skills are looking to branch out and use those skills in more ways. We wanted to integrate our tools more and improve workflow. Plus, since we merged with Allaire, and they have great server-side tools, we were looking for ways to integrate our server-side and client-side applications, now that they’re under one roof."

The Macromedia-Allaire merger occurred last March. It brought together Macromedia’s Web content creation software with Allaire’s application servers and application development solutions.

In some ways, Flash MX is a descendant of the merger. With it, designers can begin to take advantage of Internet application development trends by using templates, approachable scripting tools and interface components to begin rudimentary application design. Developers can leverage the multimedia capabilities along with tools such as an ActionScript editor, support for multiple developers on a project, a robust debugger and predefined Flash components to build rich Internet applications, Clark said.

Macromedia’s view is that the development and delivery of Internet content

and applications are still in their nascent stages. Creating a better experience for the user, and doing so in a rapid and cost-effective manner, is something Macromedia believes is fundamental to the next evolution of the Internet, Clark said.

"We've noticed a shift in how people are interacting with Web content," he explained. "Rather than just browsing, more and more people are going online to do things such as book travel arrangements, communicate with friends by instant messaging, and e-mailing clients. But despite this, and the fact that desktop computers have gotten much more powerful, the interface for using online applications hasn't changed that much. Nor has HTML used the increased computing power very much. That's where the Flash player comes in; it can do a lot on the client side and only interact with the server when needed."

Macromedia believes that a major part of the Internet's evolution will be in the experience that revolves around the client. Web sites are becoming more familiar and are beginning to feel like standard desktop applications. The enablement of these Internet applications lies in richer clients in conjunction with scaleable and open servers and services and rapid application design and development tools, according to Macromedia.

The company said its mission is "to make the development of dynamic content and applications more efficient, affordable and accessible." Their plan: drive the adoption of rich Web applications through the combination of "rich player technologies, approachable server environments and powerful development tools."

According to Clark, Flash MX will provide a scalable development environment, interactive video, Internet standards support, eLearning building blocks, and extensible template and component libraries. With it, you can use Macromedia's own technology while leveraging such standards as ECMAScript (ActionScript), HTML, MP3, H.263 and XML.

"If you're familiar with JavaScript, you can get into Flash MX very easily," Clark said.

Flash MX will also adopt one of the popular features of Macromedia's Dreamweaver: the Property Inspector. Addressing the complaints of several users, the new Flash will combine multiple panes into one, Property Inspector-like window.

The interactive video feature has been one very popular among those beta testing the product, Clark said. Prior to this, there's been no good way to incorporate video right inside a Web site, he added.

"A lot of sites require the user to choose which video player (Real Player, QuickTime, or Windows Media Player) they'll use, and creators have had to produce their content in multiple formats," he said. "Now you can now create just one video stream. You can incorporate video right inside your Web site, add it to existing Flash content, and make it interactive."

Video content in Macromedia Flash allows designers to maintain control of the look and feel of their applications, unlike today's existing video options that require external players to be launched and have platform inconsistencies, he said. Support for the Sorenson Spark codec ensures compressed, streaming, high-quality video playback.

Interactive video is one of the most "visible" features of Flash MX. However, it will also offer access to a broad range of resources, including

templates, code samples and pre-defined components to build rich, eLearning applications. Custom templates and application interface components can be developed, extended and reused.

However, Macromedia doesn’t see the enhanced video ability making Flash MX a competitor with, say, Real. Clark said there’s a key difference in that all of those media companies are focused on providing scalable solutions for linear video and also trying to sell servers that go along with their video product.

"That is where they make their money," Clark said. "Our focus with Macromedia Flash MX is allowing people to add video capabilities to the already existing Macromedia Flash interactive capabilities. Also, to differentiate further, you can view video in Flash immersive in one client as opposed to launching external media clients."

Plus, they do support importing QT and Windows Media files. For example, people can author their video in Final Cut Pro or iMovie to add interactivity.

"Also, we’re working to make Flash content more accessible to people with disabilities," Clark said. "This is especially important for government and education agencies, and the companies that work with them."

Development tools will include the aforementioned ActionScript programming tools, code reference and debugger to provide a complete, Internet application development environment. There’ll be a set of UI (user interface) components to let developers to create advanced Internet applications quickly, Clark said. Beefed up XML support will provide a gain of 20 times in performance when integrating data from any application server for data-rich web applications, he added.

Flash MX is Carbonized so it will run natively in Mac OS X, as well as Mac OS 9.x (with the CarbonLib extension installed). Due around March 15, it will cost US$499. Owners of previous versions can update for $199. There will also be educational, governmental, and volume pricing. In addition to the eight standard languages in which Flash usually ships, the MX version will also be available in Korean, and simplified and traditional Chinese versions.

Apple Releases Mac OS X 10.1.3

Apple today released another update to its system software bringing the current version to 10.1.3.

According to the documentation provided with the update, 10.1.3 delivers enhancements that improve the reliability of Mac OS X applications, important security features and includes new and updated support for a variety of Digital Hub peripheral devices.

Specific updates include:

CD Disc Recording Peripherals:

* Expanded support for QPS, EZQuest, LaCie, Yamaha, MCE Technologies and Sony devices

* Improved support for several digital camera models from Canon, Kodak and Sony

Graphics and OpenGL Improvements:

* DVD Playback on external VGA displays on PowerBook G4

* PowerBook video mirroring will be on by default when connecting to a new display

* Improvements for iTunes when the full screen visualizer is used

Networking and Security Improvements:

* Login authentication support for LDAP and Active Directory services
* OpenSSH version 3.0.2p1
* WebDAV support for Digest authentication
* Mail includes support for SSL encryption

The 17.3MB update is available via the Software Update Control panel

Apple Monday released another update to its system software bringing the current version to 10.1.3.

According to the documentation provided with the update, 10.1.3 delivers enhancements that improve the reliability of Mac OS X applications, important security features and includes new and updated support for a variety of Digital Hub peripheral devices.

Specific updates include:

CD Disc Recording Peripherals:

* Expanded support for QPS, EZQuest, LaCie, Yamaha, MCE Technologies and Sony devices

Image Capture and iPhoto:

* Improved support for several digital camera models from Canon, Kodak and Sony

Graphics and OpenGL Improvements:

* DVD Playback on external VGA displays on PowerBook G4
* PowerBook video mirroring will be on by default when connecting to a new display
* Improvements for iTunes when the full screen visualizer is used

Networking and Security Improvements:

* Login authentication support for LDAP and Active Directory services
* OpenSSH version 3.0.2p1
* WebDAV support for Digest authentication
* Mail includes support for SSL encryption

The 17.3MB update is available via the Software Update Control panel.

’Poor-Friendly’ Simputer Set for May Rollout

A low-cost handheld computer developed by seven Indian engineers to take the Internet to rural masses will start rolling out in May, the head of a firm pioneering the project said.

The "Simputer," short for Simple, Inexpensive, Multilingual, is championed by its followers as a friend of the poor, but some of its supporters add that its features match cool and trendy handhelds like those built by Palm Inc.

Originally expected to cost $200, it would now cost $50 more, Vinay Deshpande, chief executive of Bangalore-based Encore Software Ltd., told Reuters on Wednesday.

The color screen version is priced at $300.

"We hope to produce 50,000 Simputers in the first 12 months and take it to 300,000-500,000 in two years," Deshpande said.

Built by the non-profit Simputer Trust, the device is slightly larger than a regular handheld PC, and uses the free-to-use Linux operating system.

Its software is expected to aid farmers seeking to know commodity prices and beat middlemen and also provide speech recognition in regional languages to help illiterate rural folk.

At $250, the Simputer will be three times cheaper than a PC, and cost about the same as a color TV set, a price level which is expected to help spread computers to the corners of India, two-thirds of whose one billion people live in rural areas.

India’s current installed base of computers is around six million.

"We have orders for 1,000 Simputers from firms in healthcare and co-operative banking including few state governments," said Deshpande, whose firm is one of the two key license holders of the Simputer.

Deshpande and two of Encore’s other co-founders are part of the Simputer Trust, which developed the device with a group of computer scientists from Bangalore’s prestigious Indian Institute of Science.

The Simputer hooks up to the Internet and accommodates individual smart cards which store personal data to allow it be shared by many users. The software also translates English and regional language text into speech.

Encore is initially targeting the institutional and corporate market instead of tapping retail users which requires large marketing investments, Deshpande said.

"We are currently working to make enhancements like giving it an international style, greater memory and stronger battery power," he said. The device was first unveiled last April.

Encore has given contracts to two Bangalore-based companies to manufacture the Simputer and formed a joint venture with a Singapore-based company to market the device in Asia.

H-P to Replace Power Cords for Printers

Hewlett-Packard Co. will replace upon request certain power cord sets that are sold with its inkjet printers because of possible shock hazards, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission said on Thursday.

While no injuries or incidents have been reported with the 2.5 million cords made by Longwell Electronics that are being recalled, the connector can break exposing electrical contacts that could pose a shock hazard, the agency said in a statement.

The cord -- gray two-wire power cord sets with a LS-7C connector -- were sold with the following Hewlett-Packard printers: HP Deskjet 800 and 900 series and HP Photosmart 1000, 1100, 1200 and 1300 series inkjet printers.

Consumers should stop using those printers immediately and contact Hewlett-Packard for a replacement cord at 1-877-917-4378 or on their Web site: http://www.hp.com, the CPSC said.

Non-Settling States Tweak Microsoft Sanctions Plan

Nine states still pursuing the Microsoft Corp. antitrust case on Monday modified their proposal for harsher penalties against the company in response to criticism it would have created confusion in the computer industry.

The states, including California, Connecticut and Iowa, said the changes would make it clear that Microsoft would not be required to sell several different versions of its Windows operating system.

Instead, the company would have to sell just one "modular" Windows version from which software features such as Internet browsers, media players and instant messengers, could be removed, said Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal.

"The modified measures should deflate Microsoft’s overblown rhetoric and apocalyptic predictions about the proposed remedies," Blumenthal said.

The states’ modifications come just four days after Microsoft and the U.S. Justice Department made "refinements" to their proposed settlement of the case, hoping to mollify critics who said the deal contained loopholes that could be exploited by the company.

Microsoft’s incoming general counsel, Brad Smith, said the company was still studying the proposed changes and had not yet determined whether it considered the states’ new proposal any better than the first one.

But Smith said it was "good news that the states appear to recognize that their first proposal was riddled with problems."

The software giant reached the deal with the Justice Department in November after an appeals court in June upheld a lower court conclusion that Microsoft had used illegal tactics to maintain its Windows monopoly.

While nine of the 18 states in the lawsuit are still pursuing the case, another nine states have agreed to sign on to the proposed settlement

which would, among other things, give computer makers more freedom to feature rival software on the machines they sell.

A hearing on the proposed settlement is scheduled to begin on Wednesday. Further proceedings are due to start next week on the non-settling states' demands for stricter sanctions against Microsoft for violating U.S. antitrust laws.

Microsoft and its allies in the computer industry have said the states' proposed remedies are radical and could cause havoc in the industry and hurt consumers.

Blumenthal said the changes, filed with U.S. District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly, would also clarify another provision in their plan that requires Microsoft to disclose the inner workings of Windows.

Disclosure of the computer code was aimed at ensuring non-Microsoft software could operate with Windows, not at allowing other companies to "clone" the operating system, Blumenthal said.

The changes also would make it clear that uniform licensing requirements that the states are proposing to impose on Microsoft would apply only to companies that sell software -- not to Microsoft's corporate customers.

Microsoft could not be immediately be reached for comment but it's allies in the computer industry were not impressed with the states' amended proposal.

"Once again they've missed the point and, by focusing on Microsoft, they have ignored the collateral damage to the rest of the industry that their proposal will engender," said Jonathan Zuck, head of a pro-Microsoft trade group called the Association for Competitive Technology.

Kollar-Kotelly will hold a hearing starting March 6 on whether the proposed settlement is in the public interest. Separate hearings on the demands for tougher sanctions will begin March 11 and will likely run for 6-8 weeks.

Microsoft Seeks 2-Week Delay in Remedy Hearings

Microsoft Corp. on Tuesday asked the federal judge overseeing its antitrust case for a two-week postponement of hearings due to start next week on sanctions against the company.

In a filing with U.S. District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly, Microsoft said it needed the extra time to weigh a revised remedy proposal filed Monday by a group of nine states that have rejected a settlement of the case.

Microsoft said the revision came without warning after Microsoft had already interviewed all but one of the non-settling states witnesses in preparation for the hearings.

The software giant reached the settlement deal with the U.S. Justice Department in November after an appeals court in June upheld a lower court conclusion that Microsoft had used illegal tactics to maintain its Windows monopoly.

While nine of the 18 states in the lawsuit agreed to sign on to the settlement, another nine, including California, Massachusetts and Connecticut, are still pursuing the case saying the settlement is too weak.

Last week, Microsoft and the Justice Department revised their proposed settlement to close some perceived loopholes.

On Monday the non-settling states tweaked their tougher sanctions to answer criticisms they could create confusion in the computer industry.

A hearing on whether the proposed settlement is in the public interest starts Wednesday before Kollar-Kotelly.

She has scheduled separate proceedings starting Monday on the states' demands for tougher santions to prevent future antitrust violations.

US and Microsoft Say Settlement Best

Lawyers for Microsoft Corp. and the U.S. Justice Department told a federal judge on Wednesday their proposed antitrust settlement was better than what could be achieved by further litigation and urged its quick approval.

But U.S. District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly said she still had a lot to consider and offered no indication she would endorse the settlement ahead of hearings on a proposal for harsher sanctions from nine states who have refused to sign the pact.

"This is a very important and complex case to which I am going to give careful and thoughtful attention," Kollar-Kotelly said at the end of the day-long hearing.

Microsoft and the federal government, former adversaries in the nearly four-year-old case sought to persuade Kollar-Kotelly that their settlement is the best deal for consumers and companies trying to compete with Microsoft.

The settlement terms "go beyond those that we would likely have obtained had we litigated," Justice Department attorney Philip Beck said.

He urged Kollar-Kotelly to quickly approve the settlement. Waiting until the end of the separate hearings on the non-settling states' demands would be a prescription for "potentially inordinate delays," Beck said.

Microsoft lawyer John Warden said the company was confident it could have limited the scope of sanctions if the lawsuit were to go forward, but settled "to achieve certainty about the rules going forward."

Kollar-Kotelly did not give any indication of whether she is inclined to accept, reject or modify the settlement, but questioned some of its features in the hearing.

She also pressed Microsoft to say if it agreed with the Justice Department's interpretation of the settlement, perhaps anticipating a dispute like that which erupted over a 1995 agreement and led ultimately to the present case.

Warden, after conferring with other Microsoft lawyers present in the court, said, "We have a meeting of the minds, that we certainly agree with the scope and operation of the (settlement)."

Under the settlement proposal reached in November, computer makers would get more freedom to feature rival software on the machines they sell. It also would require Microsoft to share some of the inner workings of its Windows operating system with rival software makers.

Nine of the 18 states in the lawsuit agreed to sign on to the settlement. But another nine -- California, Connecticut, Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Utah and West Virginia -- still are pursuing the case, saying the settlement is too weak to prevent future antitrust violations.

Kollar-Kotelly’s endorsement of the settlement is required under a 1974 federal law called the Tunney Act that governs federal antitrust settlements.

Separate hearings on the calls for harsher remedies are due to start next Monday and could last two months. Microsoft has asked for a two-week delay to study some refinements of the dissenting states’ demands that include selling a version of Windows that can be stripped of features like the Web browser.

Beck told the judge the appeals court ruling was not broad enough to allow the government to impose stricter remedies against Microsoft, as some of Microsoft’s competitors and consumer groups have urged.

Specifically, Beck said the Justice Department could not have demanded any sanctions designed to take away Microsoft’s Windows monopoly unless it could prove that competitors, like Netscape with its Web browser, would have succeeded but for Microsoft’s behavior.

"If we had not settled we would have tried," Beck said. But it "would have been an uphill battle that likely would have been resolved against us."

But Kollar-Kotelly balked at that argument, saying the appeals court had set that mainly as the standard for breaking up the company. The appeals court in June ruled against breaking up the software giant.

The judge also wondered if the settlement’s definition of "middleware" was broad enough and wanted more details of a three-member panel that would oversee the settlement.

Middleware software, such as an Internet browser, sits between the computer users and the operating system and could be a threat to Microsoft’s Windows.

"I do want to know whether you are taking a different approach (from the appeals court) and if (so), I want to know why," Kollar-Kotelly said.

Judges typically give deference to the Justice Department in antitrust settlements but the Microsoft settlement confronts Kollar-Kotelly with an unprecedented situation, according to legal experts.

That’s because the courts have already ruled against Microsoft. All previous settlements under the Tunney Act, in contrast, have involved cases that never got to trial or a verdict.

Groups Vilify Microsoft Settlement

SBC Communications and four trade groups told a federal judge Wednesday that Microsoft’s landmark antitrust settlement is not in the public interest.

One other presenter, the Association for Competitive Technology (ACT), defended the settlement during the afternoon session of a hearing that could determine the deal’s fate.

U.S. District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly is charged with evaluating whether the deal is in the public interest, as mandated by the Nixon-era Tunney Act. If she decides it is, the settlement between Microsoft, the Justice Department and nine of 18 states will likely be approved.

Former judge Robert Bork, speaking on behalf of trade group ProComp, argued that the settlement is "indeed deeply harmful to the public interest" and "is completely deficient." He described the settlement as "a surrender" on the part of the Justice Department.

Bork contended that the deal failed to address one of the most important aspects of a June appeals court ruling that found Microsoft had violated U.S. antitrust law: the issue of commingling code. In its decision, the court found that Microsoft’s commingling, or merging together, of the software code for Internet Explorer and Windows 98 constituted an anticompetitive act.

"Yet this decree does not deal with it at all...so Microsoft remains free to bolt products together," Bork charged.

Stewart Baker, who represents trade groups the Computer & Communications Industry Association (CCIA) and the Software & Information Industry Association (SIIA), agreed with Bork.

"The commingling issue is central to this case," Baker said. "What a large role it should be playing in the remedy portion of this case. It would be reasonable to expect a significant remedy" on this point.

Baker explained the issue’s significance to one of the central tenets of the government’s case upheld by the Court of Appeals: that Microsoft used anticompetitive means to protect its monopoly in Intel-based operating systems.

Netscape Communications’ Web browser exploded on the scene several years ago, gaining huge popularity and market share in just a year. Combined with Java, Netscape offered software developers an alternative set of application programming interfaces (APIs) to write for, Baker said, potentially unseating Microsoft’s Windows monopoly.

"One of the things Microsoft did was commingle the code and make it impossible to remove from the browser," Baker said. This bolting process "guaranteed the ubiquity of Internet Explorer and its APIs."

In the morning presentation, Microsoft and the Justice Department argued that the mandate of the appeals court is fully addressed by the settlement’s sanctions governing so-called middleware and compelling

Microsoft to disclose APIs. The settling states reiterated the argument in their afternoon remarks.

Richard Schwartz, an attorney for the settling states, said of the middleware market: "It is that competition the proposed decree will restore." Schwartz argued the deal would allow middleware markets to "compete freely" and would let PC manufacturers "make market-driven choices."

Schwartz pointed to the API disclosure rules, meant to ensure that competing middleware products work as well as Microsoft middleware does with Windows. He said the rules "satisfied the settling states' goal for restoring competition."

The government defines middleware as technologies such as Web browsing, instant messaging and media playback, all of which have the potential to evolve into a replacement to Windows.

But Baker didn't buy Schwartz's assurances, because Microsoft is not forced to remove its middleware from Windows--only forced access to it. One of the settlement's provisions ensures that PC makers can install whatever middleware they want on Windows. So a computer manufacturer favoring Netscape over Internet Explorer could make Netscape the default choice and remove access to Microsoft's browser.

But that involves removing only the program's icon, not the program itself, which Baker called "a meaningless act." The remaining middleware program, with the assurance of 100 percent API compatibility with Windows, would remain to woo software developers away from competing products, he charged.

SBC Communications lawyer Donald Flexner argued that the settlement would give Microsoft free rein to squash middleware threats, as it did with Netscape and Java.

"Microsoft was successful because it killed the baby threats in the crib," Flexner said.

Bork said the settlement "lets Microsoft run wild."

"Had this proposed decree been in effect in 1995, it would not have prevented Microsoft's anti-competitive campaign against Netscape's browser and Sun Microsystems' Java," Bork said.

Philip Beck, the Justice Department's lead attorney, responded later, criticizing Bork for delivering lots of rhetoric and "no legal citations" to back up criticisms of the antitrust deal. "I am flabbergasted by that statement," he said. He also ripped into a complaint raised by SBC.

Flexner argued that the settlement does not adequately prevent Microsoft from expanding its monopoly into new markets, a fault raised by other critics and the non-settling states. Nine states and the District of Columbia rejected the settlement, opting for continued litigation. Their separate remedy commences Monday, unless Kollar-Kotelly grants a Microsoft request for a two-week delay.

Beck tried to return the focus to the monopoly-maintenance claim supported by the appeals court's ruling. SBC's theory about Microsoft using its monopoly to enter new markets "was not upheld" by the courts, he said. So there would be no legal reason to restrict Microsoft's competition in

other markets.

Gene Schaerr, who spoke for ACT, argued that competitors in fact wanted to sidetrack the settlement and use the litigating states' pursuit of stiffer sanctions to prevent Microsoft from competing in markets where they are dominant.

Schaerr used the analogy of an injured chicken in a coop. The other birds peck the injured chicken "until that chicken is no longer in competition for the food supply," Schaerr said.

The American Antitrust Institute also made a presentation questioning whether Microsoft and the Justice Department had properly disclosed all political contacts during the settlement process. The Tunney Act also requires that no backroom political deal-making influence the outcome of an antitrust settlement.

AAI attorney Mike Lenett argued that Microsoft should have disclosed all legislative contacts, rather than just those for the executive or judicial branches of government. Letting Microsoft off on the issue would "open a hole in the Tunney Act big enough to drive an army of lobbyists through, and Microsoft has an army of lobbyists," he said.

Kollar-Kotelly raised this issue in the morning session, which appeared to have been resolved in favor of Microsoft.

The judge closed the day by clearly indicating that she would treat the settlement as a separate matter from the remedy hearing scheduled for next week. At one point, legal sources speculated that she might weigh one set of sanctions against the other, choosing a single set.

Microsoft Judge Questions Scope of States' Demands

The judge overseeing the Microsoft Corp. antitrust case on Friday expressed misgivings about the breadth of demands by states seeking harsher sanctions against the software giant as she gave the company an extra week to prepare for hearings.

U.S. District Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly said she had "concerns" about the states' argument that the sanctions should be designed to protect PC-related devices and services, such as computer servers, hand-held organizers, Web services and TV set-top boxes, from Microsoft Corp.'s monopoly power.

"I have some concerns about your argument," Kollar-Kotelly told Steven Kuney, an attorney representing the states. "I think there is an argument that this is outside (the scope of the case)."

Kollar-Kotelly also granted Microsoft a week's delay in hearings originally due to start Monday on the non-settling states' proposals, agreeing the company needed time to study last-minute changes from the states.

The latest comments come about a week before the start of hearings to determine what sanctions the judge should impose on Microsoft to prevent future antitrust violations.

Meanwhile, Microsoft rival Sun Microsystems Inc. said on Friday that it had filed a private antitrust lawsuit against Microsoft in California, claiming that the company used unfair business practices to hurt its business.

The software giant reached a settlement deal with the U.S. Justice Department in November after an appeals court in June upheld a lower court conclusion that Microsoft had used illegal tactics to maintain its Windows monopoly.

While nine of the 18 states in the lawsuit agreed to sign on to the settlement, the remaining nine, including California, Massachusetts and Connecticut, are still pursuing the case, saying the settlement is too weak to prevent future violations.

The merits of the settlement were promoted to Kollar-Kotelly by lawyers for Microsoft and the Justice Department in a separate hearing held on Wednesday.

At Friday’s hearing, Kollar-Kotelly was receptive to Microsoft’s argument that testimony about computer-related devices should be excluded from the remedy hearings because they are not part of Microsoft’s monopoly market -- Intel-compatible personal computers.

"That’s the market within which the (courts’) finding of monopoly was made--not some broader market," Microsoft’s lead attorney, John Warden told the judge.

Microsoft has asked the judge to exclude all the witnesses that the states are planning to call to testify about computer-related devices and services.

Kuney told the judge that she should hear the testimony because they were potential threats to Microsoft’s Windows monopoly.

The states have argued that the sanctions against Microsoft should be "forward-looking" and prevent the company from snuffing out would-be competitors, as it did with the Netscape Navigator browser.

The judge made no ruling on the issue on Friday. But she told the states’ attorneys they need to bolster their argument in additional legal briefs.

"This is an important issue," Kollar-Kotelly said.

Minutes later, Kollar-Kotelly also expressed skepticism about whether the states should be allowed to present testimony about alleged Microsoft misdeeds that date before June 1999, when the original trial testimony ended.

The states have scheduled three witnesses to testify that the remedy should be strict because of Microsoft’s past history of wrongdoing.

But Microsoft has argued that the states should have presented it during the original trial.

Again, the judge was sympathetic to Microsoft’s argument.

"I don’t think you can go back and prove additional illegal behavior," Kollar-Kotelly told the states’ attorneys. "I don’t know whether that’s what you’re trying to do, but that’s what it sounded like.

One attorney who attended the proceedings said the judge’s comments do not bode well for the states’ case.

"It looks like an uphill fight for the states," this attorney said outside the hearing.

Sun Files Antitrust Lawsuit Against Microsoft

Microsoft Corp.’s most vocal rival, Sun Microsystems Inc. , on Friday filed an antitrust lawsuit against the software giant, claiming its business was damaged by Microsoft’s abusive monopoly.

The suit seeks damages of more than $1 billion, Sun General Counsel Michael Morris said. Under antitrust legislation, the courts would triple that award, he said.

In Oct. 2001, Microsoft began shipping its Windows XP operating system without support for Sun’s Java software programming language, Morris said, a move that has damaged Sun’s computer server business.

"Our suit seeks compensation from Microsoft for illegally impeding Sun’s business and harming the Java platform -- acts that Microsoft was found guilty of in federal court in Washington, (D.C.)," Michael Morris, general counsel for Santa Clara, California-based Sun, said in a conference call with analysts and reporters.

Microsoft spokesman Jim Desler called the issues old news.

"It’s time to move past these issues, many of which are related to a lawsuit the parties settled last year," Desler said.

Redmond, Washington-based Microsoft has been found to have violated antitrust law in a landmark case brought by the federal government and state attorneys general. It also faces private antitrust suits from consumers and from the world’s largest Internet media company AOL Time Warner.

In the suit, filed in U.S. District Court in San Jose, California, Sun called for Microsoft to disclose and license the underlying computer code and information related to products such as Internet Explorer and its latest Internet technology -- .Net.

Sun -- a manufacturer of large computers used to manage corporate networks -- and Microsoft have had a bitter relationship for many years.

Sun Chief Executive Scott McNealy has been known to poke fun of Microsoft, calling the Windows operating system "a hairball." In 1997, Sun sued Microsoft, saying it violated its copyright licensing agreement for Java, a "write once, run anywhere" computer language that lets software run on a variety of operating systems. Sun settled for $20 million.

Morris said he hopes to have a hearing in April and have a response from the courts within a year to its request that Microsoft begin including its Java software on Windows XP.

The move wasn’t a surprise to Microsoft watchers, who have been keeping a

close eye on the continuing court cases.

"We expected Sun to sue Microsoft just like AOL did, based on the findings of the district court that Microsoft was, in fact, a monopoly," said Brendan Barnicle, an analyst with Pacific Crest Securities.

In that suit, once-dominant Netscape, the browser unit of AOL, said it suffered because of Microsoft's unfair promotion of its own Internet Explorer browser, which now is the market leader. Microsoft bundled the browser with its Windows operating system, leading to the government suit.

Rob Enderle, an analyst at Giga Group, said he expects more companies to file suit against Microsoft, including RealNetworks Inc.

RealNetworks, whose software popularized the playing of audio and video over the Web, has seen intense competition from Microsoft, which has made its own media software a key part of its latest operating system. Real has complained that the settlement between the Justice Department and Microsoft will do nothing to check Microsoft's marketplace muscle.

Sun's suit was filed on the same day that a federal judge said she will grant Microsoft a one-week delay in the start of hearings, originally due to begin next week, on antitrust sanctions that a group of states is seeking against it.

James Lucier, Prudential Securities analyst said Sun's public release of the filing was planned to coincide with these hearings. "Sun does have a valid case which Sun is presenting here. But it is no accident that this filing comes on an unusually high visibility day," Lucier said.

Still, it won't be an easy victory for Sun, one lawyer said.

"I think, generally, they've got a very strong foundation to build on based on the court of appeals confirmation that Microsoft engaged in illegal activities to maintain its monopoly," said Richard Gray, a Silicon Valley attorney who has watched the Microsoft and DOJ case closely.

Sun said that the cost of litigation was "fully budgeted" and would not be material to Sun's financial performance. Sun has been struggling with three quarters of straight losses due to the collapse of the dot-coms that once fed its business.

On a conference call, Morris came under fire from Bear Stearns analyst Andrew Neff, who asked: "Why not just beat them in the marketplace? You'll never see the money, this will just go on and on."

Morris said he expected the case to move relatively quickly since many facts had been established in the government case.

"We will see the money," he said. "We have no fear of competing with Microsoft in the marketplace. When we set our minds to win we usually do," Morris said.

Copyright Proof Due in Napster Case

A federal judge gave the record labels suing Napster until Thursday to produce documents proving they own the copyrights to 213 songs that once

traded for free over the song-swap service.

U.S. District Judge Marilyn Hall Patel ordered the labels to provide certificates of copyright registration, or applications for such proof, for top-selling artists such as the Beatles and Elvis Presley.

A special master, Neil Boorstyn, was appointed by Patel to examine the labels' documents. He will file a report to the court detailing whether the labels have sufficiently established copyright ownership rights.

Patel's latest order stems from her previous ruling, which was made public Feb. 22. At that time, she gave notice to the major labels that they would need to turn over documents proving they own the rights to the songs.

In that earlier ruling, Patel also opened the door to legal discovery on Napster's claims that the labels misused their copyrights to dominate the growing online music distribution industry.

The deadline for the record labels to turn the documents over to Boorstyn was made public Wednesday, though the labels have known since the February ruling that they would expected to produce them.

It's a last grasp by Napster to limit monetary damages in a case that has slowly gone against the Redwood City-based company since its service went offline in July. Napster is poised to return as a subscription music download service, but an official launch date has not been announced. It is in a limited beta testing mode.

The company remains convinced they've made a dent in the armor of the recording industry by convincing a judge to force the labels to turn over copyright ownership documents.

"It's rarely happened that the labels have been put through their paces in this way," said Jonathan Schwartz, Napster's general counsel.

Cary Sherman, general counsel for the Recording Industry Association of America, has said the labels stand ready to refute Napster's claims that they've worked in collusion to dominate the digital distribution market.

The case is A&M Records v. Napster, No. C99-5183

HP Merger Plans Get Big Boost

The proposed merger of Hewlett-Packard and Compaq Computer received a much-needed boost Tuesday when an influential advisory firm recommended that shareholders vote in favor of the deal.

"Strong integration planning can minimize the risks associated with failure and thereby shift the balance in favor of a deal," ISS said in its report.

The recommendation by ISS, an adviser to major money managers and pension funds, has long been considered crucial to the passage of the hotly contested $22 billion merger. Descendants of HP's founders, who hold 18 percent of the company's shares, have already announced their opposition to the deal.

ISS advises money managers how to vote on proxies and other corporate

governance issues. It has about 750 clients, including several large mutual-fund companies.

The ISS recommendation comes exactly two weeks before HP shareholders are scheduled to vote on the deal.

Investors who hold about 21 percent of outstanding shares have publicly said they oppose the deal. That figure includes the heirs and foundations of co-founders David Packard and William Hewlett.

Institutional investors holding about 5 percent of the shares have said they support the deal. But the remaining 74 percent of shareholders are undecided or have not declared their intentions; a sizable group could be influenced by Tuesday's decision by ISS.

Typically, about half of ISS' clients add the proxy-consulting firm's research reports to the mix of other research they have amassed before casting their own vote. In these cases, ISS has no idea how a given investor voted, said Patrick McGurn, director of corporate programs for proxy service Proxy Monitor, which is affiliated with ISS.

In the other cases, ISS plays a greater role in swaying shareholders.

About 60 percent of its clients allow ISS to cast their ballot, with the company's recommendation serving as the default on how the client votes. Most of the other clients give ISS guidelines on certain criteria that need to be considered when determining how that investor should vote, with the client retaining the right to veto ISS' recommendation before the consulting firm casts the ballot.

Barclays Global Advisors, one of HP's largest institutional shareholders, with more than a 3 percent stake, plans to let ISS cast its vote based on its decision. Barclays previously said it plans to defer its decision to ISS because of a potential conflict of interest. The firm's chief executive, Patricia Dunn, is an HP director.

In this particular merger, more clients are expected to take matters into their own hands because of the contentiousness and size of the merger, potentially the largest ever in the technology industry.

Toni Sacconaghi, an analyst at Sanford C. Bernstein, said he expects that in addition to Barclays, the index funds making up about 9 percent of HP shares will also vote along with the ISS recommendation.

Sacconaghi also noted that although ISS' opinion will carry a lot of weight, evaluating mergers is not the key strength of the company's 30 analysts, who focus largely on other issues of corporate governance.

"Should ISS rightfully have such a large impact in determining the outcome of the (HP-Compaq) merger?" he said in a research note Monday. "No, but the fact is, they do."

Ahead of the ISS decision, Banc of America Securities analyst Joel Wagonfeld said he expected the impact to be largely psychological, with many institutional shareholders making up their own minds.

"We think odds remain against the deal, however ISS decides," Wagonfeld said in a research note published Tuesday morning.

Indeed, not everyone has been waiting for the ISS report. A number of

shareholders already have spoken out against the deal, with more lining up against the deal than for it.

Sunil Reddy, portfolio manager of the Fifth Third Technology Fund, is an ISS client but said last week in an interview that he has already decided to vote against the deal.

"We are interested in what (ISS is) going to say," Reddy said, but he added that he did not see anything the firm could say that would change his firm’s mind on the vote.

House Panel Approves Kid-Friendly Internet Domain

A Congressional panel gave the nod Thursday to a bill that would set up a kid-friendly zone on the Internet free of violence, pornography or other material deemed inappropriate for children.

The bill would direct the operator of the ".us" Internet domain to set up a ".kids" subdomain for Web sites targeted at children under 13 years old.

Parents would find it easier to screen out sex or violence online by setting their browsers to only view Web sites with addresses ending in ".kids.us," said Rep. Fred Upton, whose telecommunications subcommittee unanimously approved the bill.

"It would be like a safe playground with fences around it. This really is no different from the children’s section at the public library," the Michigan Republican said.

Upton said he would push for the full Energy and Commerce Committee to take up the bill by the end of March, with the hopes that it would become law as soon as July.

Lawmakers initially hoped the global body that manages the Internet’s domain-name system would set up a .kids domain alongside established domains like .com and .net.

After the Internet Corporation For Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) passed on the idea in November 2000, several lawmakers introduced a bill that would force ICANN to set up a .kids domain.

But sponsors backed off from that plan last fall after witnesses told them it could be difficult to overrule ICANN, which is not under direct U.S. government control.

The revised bill approved Thursday directs the operator of the United States’ own country-code domain, NeuStar Inc., to set up and police a .kids subdomain which would be overseen by the Commerce Department’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

NeuStar would be expected to police the domain to ensure that it remained free of inappropriate content. The company would be exempt from lawsuits filed by those whose Web sites it took offline.

NTIA head Nancy Victory said she did not have any problems with the new bill, which does not create conflicts with ICANN and does not require her agency to set content standards.

"It eliminates a lot of those things we were concerned about," Victory said. "I really do think we're moving in the right direction on this."

NeuStar, which won the contract to manage .us last fall, has said in the past that it intends to set up a .kids area as part of its efforts to revitalize the little-used domain.

NeuStar officials were not available for comment.

Yahoo Builds More Fees Into GeoCities

Yahoo is slowly weeding the freeloaders from its home page community, GeoCities.

Last week, the Web portal quietly introduced a paid option for home-page builders, another attempt to convert free subscribers by limiting some features and promoting others. At the same time, the company told its free customers that by early April they would no longer be able to use "remote loading" or file transfer protocol (FTP), the oldest and most prevalent way to deliver content onto a Web page.

If customers want those options, however, they can become paid subscribers.

"Within our free user base there's a certain amount of abuse around FTP and remote loading," which describes using servers only to deliver images to remote pages, said Mark Hull, director of community services at Yahoo. "There's a lot of cost for us to be sure the service is used in the way it's intended."

The move plays into Yahoo's campaign to shave overhead from many of its free features while building revenue with new subscription services. Since a severe decrease in ad spending, the company has been hard-pressed to diversify revenue. In recent months, it's tacked fees onto a range of services, including personal classified ads and fantasy sports.

The changes also give Yahoo more leverage in its push to turn people using free features into paying customers. Last fall, Yahoo pressed GeoCities members to limit their bandwidth use or risk losing their Web sites.

In a roundabout way, that September notice promoted additional bandwidth offered in two new subscription services, which were introduced the previous month. Yahoo launched GeoCities Pro and GeoCities Webmaster for roughly $9 and $12 a month, respectively. They give customers an ad-free site, a personal domain name, more storage space and advanced Web-building tools, among other amenities. Still, Yahoo continued a basic service for free.

Now the company is introducing a $4.95 service that lets customers use FTP and remote loading, features once free. The new option also comes with extra storage and ad-free pages.

Yahoo said it plans to cut off remote loading from free customers because the service is often abused. For example, people auctioning goods on eBay may sign up for a free GeoCities page only to use Yahoo's server to display photos of for-sale items.

"It’s kind of like a free ride," Hull said. "We pay for storage and bandwidth, but the user is using that picture somewhere else...for commercial services that don’t have anything to do with Yahoo. (GeoCities) is designed for people to publish and have a community experience."

Similarly, he said the company is placing restrictions on FTP because it can be misused and because it’s not a tool often employed by beginning site builders, Yahoo’s main audience. FTP, software used to transfer files from one computer to another, is one of the oldest ways to deliver a Web page onto the Internet. Hull said Yahoo offers more rudimentary tools to upload files online.

Yahoo would not say how many people may be affected by the changes.

Jason Price, who uses GeoCities and FTP for his personal Web page, said he is disappointed by constant moves by big companies such as Yahoo to charge for services they said would always remain free.

"I remember Yahoo in the early years of the Internet. They promised free e-mail forever, but I’m not sure about FTP," Price said in an e-mail interview. "I’m very disappointed in GeoCities. I think consumers are smart, and I hope they don’t give in."

Can Linux Push Microsoft to Free Windows?

In its slow -- some would say inexorable -- march into the hearts and minds of computer users, the open source Linux operating system (OS) has made its way onto an estimated 18 million desktops around the world.

The ever-increasing popularity of Linux, which is essentially free, prompts the question: Could Microsoft eventually be forced to release a free version of Windows in order to maintain its apparent stranglehold on the planet’s desktop operating systems?

"It is a pretty interesting [idea], but ’free’ and ’Microsoft’ don’t go together," Gartner analyst Dave Smith told NewsFactor.

"Microsoft has only done that when it was absolutely the last straw -- the last possible way they could compete with something," Smith said. "I don’t think it’s happened yet with Linux -- it would take a lot more than what we’ve seen so far."

Linux market share grew from 1.3 percent in 1999 to 1.5 percent in 2000, according to research firm IDC.

Yet many think that share is primed to jump because of adverse reactions to Microsoft’s perceived arrogance and, more specifically, to the company’s tendency to try to continually strengthen its monopoly and its revenue.

According to critics, Microsoft has not taken the federal antitrust suit against it seriously enough, and its latest major release, Windows XP, contains many of the same self-promoting features that spurred the suit in the first place.

Also, restrictive new software licensing terms set forth by the software giant have angered many businesses and software developers.

According to an IDC study, 15 percent of Microsoft business users are sufficiently concerned about the Redmond, Washington-based software company's licensing move that they are considering installing either Linux or another operating system. Other industry polls put that number as high as 40 percent.

Although analysts said this discontent will not result in large-scale Linux adoption by the mainstream desktop market, there are some signs that open source may be gaining steam.

For example, Sun Microsystems recently announced its support of the open source community, along with a plan to provide its own Linux distribution. And the open source Linux community continues to develop distributions that it claims are viable candidates to compete with Windows.

But even the most optimistic Linux fans admit that the alternative OS must first conquer other areas, such as embedded systems, before it can legitimately challenge the Windows Goliath on the desktop.

"In some ways, it already has [begun to challenge]," Smith said. "I think if Linux starts making serious inroads onto the desktop, all bets are off."

But Smith is skeptical about Linux backers who say the time is right for Linux to make a push.

"They've been saying that about UNIX for 20 years," he said. "The time is always 'right,' but then again, Microsoft couldn't be stronger as a competitor. Does 'the time is right' mean Linux is easier to install? Yes, it gets easier every day. Does it mean Linux is easier to use? Yes, it gets easier every day. Linux has more applications, like (desktop office suite) StarOffice. People aren't even willing to use StarOffice on Windows -- why are they going to use it on Linux?"

IDC analyst Al Gillen agreed that Microsoft will not be forced to react to the burgeoning open source movement anytime soon.

"Over the short term, I don't think that's something we can expect to see," Gillen told NewsFactor.

"The only reason a company would release a free operating system is if the value proposition is no longer related enough to the operating system and it becomes important to make sure the OS is used, so that the value becomes the products that run on top of the OS," he said.

Gillen used as an example Sun's release of Solaris 8 as a free operating system for Intel, though he noted that system is not completely free because users must buy a Solaris box in order to run it.

"In cases like that, we're seeing the OS being commoditized to a degree," he said. "But the commodization is happening because of the fact that there are other, very similar products on the market, e.g. Linux.

"In this particular case, there's nothing that's compatible or directly competitive with Windows," Gillen added. "In other words, there's nothing else that runs a Windows application. Until that happens, there is no reason for Microsoft to even consider that [free] possibility."

=~=~=~=

Atari Online News, Etc.is a weekly publication covering the entire Atari community. Reprint permission is granted, unless otherwise noted at the beginning of any article, to Atari user groups and not for profit publications only under the following terms: articles must remain unedited and include the issue number and author at the top of each article reprinted. Other reprints granted upon approval of request. Send requests to: dpj@atarinews.org

No issue of Atari Online News, Etc. may be included on any commercial media, nor uploaded or transmitted to any commercial online service or internet site, in whole or in part, by any agent or means, without the expressed consent or permission from the Publisher or Editor of Atari Online News, Etc.

Opinions presented herein are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the staff, or of the publishers. All material herein is believed to be accurate at the time of publishing.